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International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States

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Agenda item 8
Comprehensive review of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States

Summaries of panel discussions

Note by the Secretariat

Addendum

Panel five
Resilience-building in small island developing States (Wednesday, 12 January 2005, 10 a.m.-1 p.m.)

Summary of discussions prepared by the Chairperson

1. Panel five addressed the topic of resilience-building in small island developing States. The panel was chaired by Maria Madalena Brito Neves, Minister of Environment, Agriculture and Fisheries of Cape Verde. Professor Albert Binger, Director of the Centre for Environment and Development, University of the West Indies, Coordinator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) expert group on small island developing States and member of the Committee on Development Policy, moderated the discussion. The four panellists were Toke Talagi, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Environment of Niue; Professor Michael Witter of the University of the West Indies and a member of the UNDP expert group on small island developing States; Teresa Manarangi-Trott, private consultant from the Cook Islands; and Siv Jensen, Chairman of the Finance Committee in the Norwegian Parliament.

2. The panellists' presentations, along with comments and questions from the Chairperson, the Moderator and from the floor, including representatives of Governments, organizations and civil society, discussed resilience-building in small island developing States from the perspective of their common elements of vulnerability, as well as some recent catastrophic weather events, and ongoing and proposed measures to deal with the serious and often long-term consequences for individual countries. The views of a major donor country regarding its foreign assistance priorities stimulated further discussion. The panel's recommendations are

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being presented to the high-level round tables to promote intergovernmental dialogue on practical measures to advance the small island developing States agenda, and will be included in the report of the International Meeting.

3. The issues raised in the panel discussion and the recommendations proposed can be grouped under three headings, as set out below.

Elements of vulnerability

4. The panellists highlighted a number of key elements of vulnerability common to all of them, namely: smallness (of size and of population, limiting human resources and internal markets); remoteness (from markets, adding to transportation costs); reliance on energy imports (energy vulnerability); geographical dispersion; vulnerability to natural disasters and extreme weather events; fragile ecosystems (especially coral reefs and coastal areas); constraints on information and communication technology; vulnerability to exogenous economic and financial shocks; lack of natural resources (especially limited freshwater supplies, fuel sources and agricultural/food products); and high levels of migration of skilled personnel (see also A/CONF.207/CRP.5).

5. Although rejecting the "one-size-fits-all" description of small island developing States, the panellists stressed that their limited natural, economic and human capital was a common constraint affecting their ability to absorb and respond to external shocks, whether man-made, such as from market/financial forces, or shocks resulting from natural hazards, such as those caused by extreme weather events. The recent tragic earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean was referred to as the most recent and destructive example of the impact of natural disasters.

Building resilience: lessons learned

6. The experience of Niue was discussed by the panel as a case of major economic and environmental devastation caused in January 2004 by cyclone Heta, the largest cyclone ever recorded in the Pacific. One year later, lessons learned in building resilience included the importance of communications — to get the facts of the disaster out quickly and correctly and to mobilize media and donor support. It was also important to pre-position relief supplies and emergency assistance. The prior planning of infrastructure and public utilities helped to facilitate speedy rehabilitation. Effective decision-making and management by government, at all levels, including setting priorities and getting the message to the people and local grass-roots and civil society organizations, was essential. Simultaneous long-term planning in post-cyclone recovery efforts and understanding the role that culture played in building resilience, through community-based and traditional psychological counselling, helped a devastated population overcome the trauma of destruction to their land, resources and livelihoods and to move forward to a long-term recovery.

7. Other panellists spoke of similar experiences of devastation and vulnerability after hurricane Ivan hit the Caribbean in 2004. The destruction caused was greatly exacerbated by years of environmental damage due to human activities, such as deforestation and beach and coastal erosion, often caused by the concentration of tourist facilities on fragile coasts. It was stressed that short-term economic gains from building hotels might ultimately be overtaken by the costs of long-term environmental damage to land and marine resources and related biodiversity.

8. One conclusion suggested was that the smallness of small island developing States required more of an inclusive, integrated approach to development, rather than the traditional sectoral approach to achieve sustainable development and "ecosystem resilience". Capacity-building, including human resources development and management, good governance and public participation, including private and local sectors, were essential for resilience-building and sustainable development.

9. An important consideration mentioned by one panellist was that, as much as "one-size-fits-all" did not describe the physical characteristics of all small island developing States, that concept might also not be relevant for donors in considering financial assistance and trade preferences, which were determined more by individual requirements and needs. The diversity among small island developing States highlighted the need to tailor specific remedies for each country. Economic and trade diversification could be crucial, and donor commitments to investment in economic diversification could be essential.

Suggestions for further action

10. Resilience-building in small island developing States requires attention to:

- Means of recovery from natural environmental disasters and external economic shocks
- Innovative modalities for mobilizing resources and financing for development
- Mechanisms for evaluation and follow-up
- Sustainable solutions to energy concerns
- New information and communications technologies
- Partnerships among Governments, civil society, the private sector and the international community
- Establishment and/or strengthening of early warning systems
- National security

11. Governments of small island developing States can and should take steps to:

- Integrate economic, environmental, social, and cultural considerations into disaster-management plans
- Diversify trade activities and develop strategies for coping with economic instability
- Manage in an inclusive and integrated way the environmental resources that sustain the economies of small island developing States
- Include civil society in the formulation and implementation of public policy in meaningful ways to strengthen capacity for resilience

12. Major groups and civil society play an important role in resilience-building by:

- Increasing capacity through training, education and research
- Developing global information-sharing systems
- Raising awareness on indigenous issues

13. The international community and development partners can support small island developing States in building resilience and achieving sustainable development by:

- Rapid mobilization of resources for disaster relief and reconstruction
- Strengthening capacities of small island developing States to work at the regional and subregional levels
- Supporting and improving strategies to develop collaborative partnerships
- Revising the use of GDI/GDP as criteria when considering small island developing States economies within the framework of financing for development
- Funding scientific research and community-based initiatives for sustainable development in small island developing States